

Draft Minutes

Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament

Committee Meeting

October 18, 2004

Members Present

Claude Bain
B. W. Beauchamp
Nancy Cobb
Dave Elliott
Bill Hall
Jon Lucy
Ken Neill
Charles Randolph
Christine Snook
John Thurston
Richard Welton

Members Absent

Charles Lovell

Public Attendees

Robert S. Holtz
Mark Snook

The Meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm by Tournament Director Claude Bain, who noted a quorum was present.

Mr. Bain asked if the Committee had reviewed the minutes from last year's meeting and if there were any corrections. None were raised and Mr. Beauchamp moved to accept the minutes, seconded by Mr. Elliott, and passed unanimously.

Mr. Bain welcomed Mr. Holtz and Mr. Snook and asked if Mr. Holtz wished to address the Committee during the public comment period. Mr. Holtz stated he had no comments but would like to relay a concern surfacing in the angling community this week.

Mr. Bain then opened public comment period. Mr. Holtz stated that Debbie Hurst and other anglers were curious about the certification of weigh station scales, which had been discussed at last year's meeting. Specifically, what was done to certify all scales regularly.

Mr. Bain replied that he had checked most scales at Rudee Inlet and Lynnhaven during the year and Bill Hall had checked most of the scales on the Eastern Shore, but that the systematic check of all scales, which had started last spring, was started but not finished and was his responsibility. Mr. Welton stated it should be scheduled each year, but even annual checking will not solve the problem subject to recent comments, which involve weighing spot and slight variations in scales. Checking scales once a year will not solve that problem.

Mr. Bain then closed the public comment period.

Mr. Bain then stated the Committee would proceed to the Agenda, but would consider the appeals of rejected Citations first (Item VI) since there was only one appeal.

Appeal of Rejected Citation

Mr. Bain reviewed the formal request for a Citation by William Moore for the release of a black drum. Mr. Moore provided a picture of the fish on a ruler with his request. Moore had been fishing with Jim Jenrette (a charterboat skipper) who advised him to go with his witness to a weigh station within seven days and register his release. Mr. Moore lives in Salisbury, MD and he drove to the Peace Token in New Church, VA during their business hours 5 days later to register his fish. The Peace Token told him they would not register his fish because the employee who does Citations was not there. He could not return within the 2 days remaining to properly register the fish. Mr. Welton moved to approve his Citation since he had followed Tournament rules and made a valid effort to properly register his fish, and was not allowed to register his fish at an appropriate weigh station. Seconded by Bill Hall, and passed unanimously.

Review of Citation Program in 2004

Mr. Bain initiated a review of the 2004 Citation program, reviewing each species, the number of Citations issued during the year, and discussions about the reasons for increases or decreases in Citation numbers. The Committee made particular note of the following:

- Amberjack Citations at lowest level in more than 20 years; probably a result of a combination of better offshore fishing (which often competes with amberjack for effort), continued decline in coastwide population affecting northern end of range significantly, poorer fishing at Southern Tower (as noted by Ken Neill), and a fall in effort at Southern Tower due gasoline prices.
- Black Drum Citation decline due to fall off in season off Cape Charles. Ms. Snook noted year was not nearly as good as prior year. Mr. Bain stated weather probably biggest factor with 2003 producing cool spring and early summer and cool water temperatures which kept drum biting into July; 2004 had a more typical season with the bite fading in very early June.
- Cobia fishing was substantially down, without a good reason for the drop since Orgeon Inlet had a banner spring. Mr. Bain stated part of the Citation drop was the increase in Citation minimum, but fishing overall was still down. He added fishing still much better than the 20 year period in the 1970's and 1980's when cobia were almost absent from the Bay. Mr. Welton stated effort was part of the overall picture, and while amount of effort has declined in last year, it is still substantially greater than in the 1970's and 1980's, so fishing success may not really be that much better. Some talk continued on the Orgeon Inlet fishery, including concern that the charter fishery there has grown dramatically in two

years, the emphasis in that fishery is on killing limits of fish, and those fish are heading to the Chesapeake Bay. The killing of any substantial number of fish could have an impact on Bay stocks, and earned a reference to the fishery as the “cobia intercept” fishery.

- Croaker Citations were down for the second straight year, and colder winters affecting juvenile recruitment and the mysterious disease killing many thousands of large fish were seen as negatively affecting croaker populations with a probability that croaker citations will continue to decline in the future.
- Dolphin Citations were down substantially, resulting from increase in minimum and poorer fishing this year. Ken Neill stated it was just one of those years when dolphin numbers were not as good as other years, and no way to predict future Citations.
- Flounder Citations are close to total of prior year, and Mr. Bain stated the final total would probably exceed 2003. The trend toward truly big fish continued with well over 50 fish entered weighing in excess of 10 pounds.
- Gray Trout were discussed mainly in reference to the continuing lack of big fish; the aborted recovery in the fishery as noted by anglers, the scientific community and ASMFC; and, a poorer year for small fish, as well.
- Red Drum Citations were discussed including the slight year-to-year decline in number of awards from 2003. Mr. Bain noted the decline is not as high as might be expected from an increase in the Citation minimum from 44” to 46”, and he felt the angling community was still failing to measure fish properly. He felt and had witness measuring done with tape measures not performed on a flat measuring board or surface to get a “straight-line” measurement as required by Tournament rules enacted last year. Mr. Welton stated there were more truly large fish in last two years, and Mr. Bain acknowledged his experience agreed with this assessment. However, he felt most of the population of large fish still would fall into 42-46 inch range.
- Sea Bass discussions centered upon the unexpected decline in fishing success this year, after a rebounding fishery in 2003 and hoped for benefits from a management plan that has been in place for several years. The expectations for continued improvement also were not realized in the commercial fishery. The continued interest in winter fishery and management should keep sea bass Citations high and problem with releasing sea bass in deep water and having them float off was mentioned with reference to adding a release Citation last year.
- Sheepshead fishing success continued in 2004, a result of increased effort, better informed angling public about methods of catching sheepshead, and a better fishery in 2004. Mr. Welton stated this was a Citation minimum that needed

needed to increase.

- Spadefish numbers were good and Citation numbers were probably about as expected considering the increase in the minimum length for a release last year. Mr. Bain stated the timing of the season was unusual with the very early start due to the early warm weather, the unusual slowdown of the fishery in June, then the surge of the fishery in late June. Overall, however, the number of good fishing days was probably about typical.
- Speckled Trout fishery received an unexpected boost so far this fall with good numbers of small and medium fish, and an increase in Citation numbers.
- Spot Citations at record levels with number of Citations expected to exceed 2000 fish this year. Discussion deferred to later in the meeting.
- Striped Bass Citations were discussed with reference to the excellent fishery in January producing potential for a big Citation year. Mr. Bain stated that in a “normal” year 70% of Citations produced in November and December, which could yield 1000-1200 Citation for 2004. Comparisons with 2003 Citation numbers difficult due to extremely poor fishery in December that affected awards in 2003.
- Wahoo, Yellowfin Tuna and White Marlin Citations were considered in the context of a much improved offshore fishery in 2004. The relatively low number of white marlin citations was felt to reflect the good and steady fishery for yellowfin tuna which occurred in 30 – 100 fathoms much of the summer. Much effort was concentrated in “tuna waters” while most marlin fishery in recent years has been “in the deep” (1000 fathoms). Also, continued concern in the management community for white marlin populations is indicative of a population which is likely to show big fluctuations year-to-year.

Program Philosophy

Mr. Bain reviewed the commitment made last year by the Committee to reinforce the primary goal of the program, which is to recognize true “trophy” catches, with conservation a secondary goal. This philosophy led the Committee to increase several Citation standards last year and to adjust standards primarily to ensure recognized catches are real trophies.

Mr. Bain asked for input from the Committee concerning long-range plans and philosophy.

Mr. Neill affirmed that the program’s number one concern should be to ensure standards are high enough to be recognized as worthy catches, and that he had received only two complaints from last year’s change – both involving cobia. Ms. Cobb stated that she had received only positive feedback from the public on the

changes made last year, and Mr. Welton affirmed the commitment to keep program standards high as our primary purpose.

Mr. Bain asked Mr. Neill if he still held the opinion that there should be a “kill” Citation for all species of fish it is legal for recreational fishermen to catch and keep, and Mr. Neill said he continued to feel that way. Mr. Neill stated he felt the Tournament was not meant to enforce moral decisions on keeping fish that fisheries managers should set rules to protect fish and we should recognize trophy catches consistent with management rules. Mr. Bain stated that conservation has been part of the program since 1958 and probably should not be divorced from the program, and cited as an example that despite being legal to kill a marlin, the Tournament would suffer if it offered a “kill” Citation for any marlin species.

Swordfish Citation

Mr. Bain stated the addition of “kill” Citations probably should be handled on a case-by-case basis, and several Committee members agreed that this was the best way to consider this issue. Mr. Bain asked Mr. Neill if there were any species he would like to bring before the Committee at this time. Mr. Neill stated he would like the Committee to consider a “kill” Citation for swordfish at 100 pounds, citing the fact the fish were good to eat and anglers catching a legal swordfish were going to bring the fish to the dock regardless of eligibility in the Citation program. Ms. Cobb noted that their association with other billfish and the swordfish decline along East Coast led her to believe a “kill” Citation was not good for VSWFT. Several Committee members noted the swordfish population has started to rebound and supports a growing recreational fishery in Florida. Mr. Randolph concurred with Ms. Cobb that there is still an association problem with billfish. Mr. Bain asked if the 100-pound level was really “trophy” status for swordfish considering the biology of the fish and its current population status. Several Committee members voiced opinions that any swordfish caught off Virginia was a noteworthy catch, the numbers caught in recent years and which are likely to be caught will be small, and the fish are not likely to be large. However, several also questioned whether 100 pounds was sufficient for an award. Mr. Elliott moved that the Committee adopt a “kill” Citation for swordfish at 200-pound level, and this was seconded by Mr. Beauchamp. Mr. Randolph asked why go through this exercise if the kill size was not likely to be achieved, given the small size of fish encountered in recent years. Mr. Neill stated it was achievable; the effort has been miniscule to target swordfish; and that if the Committee “put a number on the Citation, he would get the fish”. The motion to establish a 200-pound Citation for swordfish passed by a vote of 5-3.

Release Citation Program

Mr. Bain introduced discussion of the release program, which was expanded to include all species eligible for Citation awards in 2004. Ms. Cobb, Ms. Snook and Mr. Hall stated the angling public was very happy with the expanded

program. The remainder of the Committee agreed.

Mr. Bain introduced a letter by Dr. Jim Wright that seemed to indicate his feeling that the release program had been expanded too much and encouraging too much catch and releasing fish was not good. Dr. Wright made a point about the lack of tag returns for big black drum as perhaps raising an issue about survivability. Mr. Lucy stated there was no evidence of any problems associated with catch and release fishing. Mr. Bain stated that there had been almost no returns for either big red or black drum in Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program until this year, when 5 red drum out more than a year were recaptured. Program has changed to a new tag which may be better suited for the large drums, so lack of tag returns may be related to equipment used in the past. Many Committee members were unsure what the point of the letter was and felt the release part of the Tournament was “right on the money”.

Black Sea Bass Release

Mr. Bain introduced a concern expressed by Mr. Neill that the institution of a release Citation for sea bass has yielded concerns about mortality for fish caught in deep water during the growing winter fishery. Mr. Neill has received some input about people releasing “floaters” simply to get a Citation. Mr. Lucy stated that, despite the bladder inflation, a study in South Carolina with fish caught in 200 feet of water indicated a 61% survival rate. Mr. Welton stated the Committee understands the issue and should focus on options to address the problem, namely 1) no release Citation, 2) no release Citation for fish caught over certain depths, 3) no release Citation at certain times of the year (when deep water fishing occurs), 4) no release unless the fish swims down, or 5) keep release Citation as it is. Committee members came to a consensus that this was not a biological problem since few fish were involved, every fish put in a cooler was going to die and fish released alive (even if they initial float) have a chance to survive, and the real issue is a perception problem for the program. In addition, many potential options to solve the problem were either too complicated or not practical. No action was warranted or taken.

Sheepshead Citation

Mr. Bain reviewed information on sheepshead Citations for Committee consideration. Mr. Welton stated he would like to see a 10 pound minimum for a sheepshead Citation citing 1) increasing numbers of Citations due to increasing effort and better knowledge about how to catch the fish, 2) most sheepshead over 10 pounds now, and 3) Citation size was set low to encourage a fishery and as the fishery develops, the minimum should be adjusted. Mr. Welton asked to hear from Mr. Holtz who targets sheepshead. Mr. Holtz stated the current 7 pound minimum was too low; his boat produced about 50 sheepshead this year and all but a half dozen were over 7 pounds. Mr. Beauchamp moved to establish a 9 pound Citation minimum for sheepshead, which was seconded by Mr. Randolph.

Ms. Cobb felt there had not been enough discussion about whether 9 pounds or 10 pounds would be best level for Citation. Mr. Welton and Mr. Bain reviewed possibility that the population of big fish would eventually fall as this new fishery starts to “crop off” the bigger, older fish and Citation numbers might fall. Mr. Bain stated there was only one way to find out if the CBBT population was a virtually unfished group, and that was to see if the population of big fish eventually drops rapidly as the fishery grows. Mr. Hall stated a 9-pound fish was huge by standards in the southeast and no need to go to 10 pounds. Ms. Cobb stated a 2 pound jump in Citation size was big for one year. The motion to raise Citation minimum to 9 pounds passed unanimously.

Spot Citation

Mr. Bain reviewed information on spot, including his prediction that spot Citations would total more than 2000 before the end of 2004. This is the most Citations by a single species in a year since the program began in 1958. Mr. Welton stated the numbers were really the “tip of the iceberg” since many anglers caught numerous spot that qualified for Citations but only registered one fish. Mr. Bain then introduced a discussion of “what is a trophy fish” including the two views held by different Committee members – one that a trophy fish should be based upon the biology of the fish and should not be lowered and/or adjusted to reflect species abundance levels and the view that trophy size is more relative based upon species abundance and the Committee should actively work to adjust Citation levels to reflect species abundance. Mr. Welton stated theoretical talk about Citation levels was fine, but the Committee has a problem with spot; he said this was discussed last year, it’s a bigger problem now, and a 1 pound spot is not worthy of trophy status at this time. Mr. Bain brought up an issue raised last year that scales might create a problem if spot were increased above a pound since the change would probably be a 1 or 2 ounce adjustment. Mr. Neill stated there are too many multiple catches qualifying at this time indicating the size must be adjusted upward. Mr. Hall stated the abundance of spot has allowed a lot of people who rarely get a chance to earn a Citation a chance to participate in the VSWFT, and we should be careful not to raise it too much or at the wrong time. Mr. Welton moved to raise Citation size to 1-lb., 2-oz., and this was seconded by Mr. Beauchamp. Mr. Beauchamp added that the big spot have created a lot of excitement in the Rappahannock River and among anglers who rarely get Citations. Mr. Neill stated he had received only two comments on spot: Tom Powers wanted the Citation to stay the same, calling spot a “blue collar fish” and another person wanted the release size lowered. Mr. Welton stated his motion for a 1-lb., 2-oz. Citation might raise the Citation size too much, or it might not raise it enough, but the spot surge has baffled the Committee and scientists and this action must be taken to protect the primary goal of the program to only recognize trophy-size fish. The motion passed 8-1.

Striped Bass Citation

Mr. Bain reviewed information on striped bass, including the possibility that Citation numbers would reach 1000-1200 with a good fishing season in December. He reviewed data which showed that 70% of striped bass Citations occurred in November and December, and asked the Committee if they felt current Citation levels were appropriate. Mr. Neill, Hall and Welton all stated 40 pounds was a trophy. Mr. Welton added he would not favor increasing the release size since ASMFC has indicated the fishing mortality on big fish is exceeding target levels and we should continue to encourage release and not do anything to encourage additional killing. The Committee also felt participation in the striped bass fishery was extremely high and this justified Citation numbers which were higher than for some other species in years when weather conditions permitted a strong winter fishery; years in which weather conditions are not favorable (such as 2003), catches and Citation numbers fall. No action recommended.

Flounder Citation

Mr. Bain reviewed flounder information in response to Committee decision at last year's meeting that flounder Citation size had to be monitored in view of the increasing population of fish. Ms. Cobb stated the fishing year has been good and 7 pounds is a trophy. Mr. Welton stated participation is high and the percentage of the fishermen earning Citations in this fishery is much smaller than in several other species, so he did not see a problem at this time. No action recommended.

Request to be Weigh Station by Richard Lockhart

Mr. Bain reviewed a formal request by Richard Lockhart, a charterboat captain, to become a weigh station to register Citation fish for his clients. Mr. Lockhart operates from the creek behind his house in the Northern Neck, there are no weigh stations near his dock, and his clients often are from out-of-the area or state and do not have access to weigh stations where they live. Mr. Bain stated this is not a problem in Hampton Roads, the Eastern Shore, or Peninsula where the charters operate from marinas, which usually have weigh stations on site or nearby. Mr. Bain further stated the problem has been further complicated by the dwindling of small country stores and business due to the "big box" stores moving to rural areas (WalMarts, Food Lions) because in the past the VSWFT enlisted local businesses (country stores, local gasoline stations, hardware stores) to be weigh stations to service these areas. The Committee has consistently denied similar requests to protect the integrity of the program, but this issue needs to be addressed in the current context. Ms. Snook stated she could not support allowing captains to be weigh stations for their own clients stating she currently has a problem with a captain who attempts to persuade her to write Citations for fish when the fish fall short of qualifying weight on her scales. Mr. Beauchamp stated most boats in his area are in early enough to have anglers get to a weigh station before leaving. Mr. Hall stated the solution is to recruit more weigh stations. Mr.

Bain stated he has received comments from two operators of weigh stations in VA Beach who have had problems with captains and they felt this would not be good for the VSWFT. Mr. Welton moved to deny the request to become a weigh station stating the integrity issue was important and did not need to “open this can of worms”; further, the VSWFT should work with Mr. Lockhart to identify a business in his area which could become a weigh station and help establish a convenient location for his clients. The motion was seconded by Mr. Beauchamp, who asked what criteria are used for weigh stations. Mr. Bain stated the criteria are simple: a weigh station must be open to the public and have a place of business with established and posted hours operations, and now must have their own scale. The reasons are simple – the public must know where and when to go to register fish for Citations. Mr. Thurston worried that allowing charter captains to weigh their clients fish would result in a flood of new, “private” weigh stations that really did not serve the public at large and there would be a large number of additional scales the program would then have to check and certify. Mr. Bain asked if the Committee had thought about allowing registration of releases only, since there were no real weigh-in requirements and no additional questions of integrity that had to be addressed. Several members responded they did not feel “partial” weigh station status was a good precedent to set and felt appearing at a weigh station still helped bolster the integrity of the program with respect to releases, since it requires a positive action on the part of anglers and witnesses and a “last” chance for them to reconsider a bogus entry. Several Committee members related personal experiences involving Citation registration, including driving significant distances, and stated it was not always going to be easy, but that was not always bad. Ms. Cobb and Mr. Welton stated we needed to respond in a helpful way to Mr. Lockhart, including assisting him to find a weigh station, but this was not a precedent they wished to establish. Mr. Welton further stated unless the captain insists on cleaning all the fish for his clients, a local weigh station should solve the problem. Mr. Thurston questioned the statement in Mr. Lockhart’s request about his being “unwilling” to go with his clients to a weigh station. The motion to deny passed unanimously.

Barracuda Citation

Mr. Bain introduced a request from then public for a Citation for barracuda, which was carried over from last year’s meeting. Mr. Neill stated they were a nuisance when fishing for other fish and he felt other fish might be considered for Citation program inclusion before barracuda. Mr. Elliott inquired about the criteria used when adding fish to the program. Mr. Bain responded fish included in the program generally were either important to our recreational fisheries even if they were not considered game fish, such as spot or croaker, or they were regarded as true game fish and appeared with some manner of regularity in local water, such as tarpon. Mr. Neill stated we also have included fish for which we wanted to develop a recreational fishery, such as sheepshead. Mr. Welton stated he did not think barracuda fit these criteria. Mr. Randolph moved we not consider a Citation for barracuda, seconded by Ms. Snook. Mr. Thurston stated barracuda

really were an excellent game fish and we seem to have some fish here each year and he made a substitute motion to establish a Citation at 20 pounds with a commensurate length for a release Citation., seconded by Mr. Elliott. Mr. Randolph stated it appeared to him we might be considering adding this fish to the program for the sake of just adding to the program without a valid reason to add barracuda. Ms. Snook inquired about the level of public demand for a barracuda Citation, and Mr. Bain said there was a formal request two years ago that was tabled at last year's meeting and no requests or comments had been received this year. Mr. Bain asked for further comments and explained the Committee would vote on the substitute motion first. By a vote of 6-4 the motion to add barracuda to the program at 20-pound minimum was defeated. The original motion not to consider barracuda for inclusion in the Citation program passed by a vote of 8-1.

Adjournment

Mr. Hall moved that the meeting be adjourned, seconded by Mr. Elliott and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 pm.